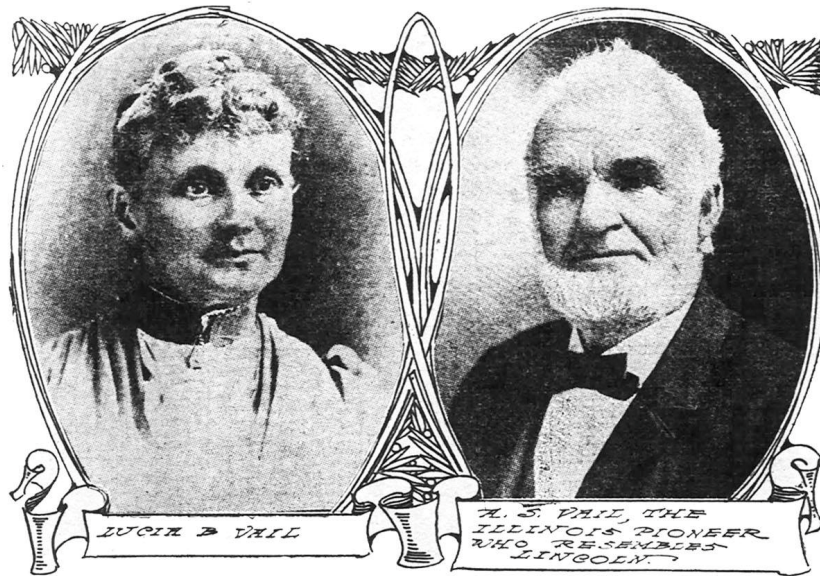


# LINCOLN'S DOUBLE



## AND ILLINOIS PIONEER

Inter Ocean, Chicago, IL- February 10, 1907

At Momence, Ill., the bus had just started from the depot for the hotel, when someone called to the driver: "Can you make the 8:34 train on the other road?"

"I think so," came the reply. "It is now 8:36."

"To set time back in that manner would be a miracle." We remarked.

"Speaking of miracles," said a fellow passenger "reminds me of the remarkable man I have just called on. He is 96 years of age, and I'll wager that in a stunt with a crosscut saw he would outdo any one of us. "

The stranger's story aroused our curiosity, and we resolved to see what sort of man could survive the frosts of nearly a hundred winters and still apparently possess the strength of boyhood days. Leaving the hotel, in the center of town, a brisk walk of ten minutes across the bridge over the beautiful Kankakee and eastward along its southern bank brought us in front of the frame dwelling which for years has been the home of the now oldest inhabitant of Kankakee County. Although the premises were beautifully clad in snow, the general appearance

of the place could not fail to convey to the observer the modest price and good taste of its owner.



### **Appearance of Mr. Vail**

Entering the veranda, we rapped at the door, and at once stood face to face with Algernon Sydney Vail, whose hand grasp of welcome would do credit to the village blacksmith. Mr. Vail is six feet tall; of fine physique, stands erect, and moves with the ease and vigor of a man forty years his junior. We at first thought we were talking to a member of a younger generation, but the testimony of Mrs. Vail assured us that we were really in the presence of a man whose years lacked but four of the century mark. We give the following story as told by Mr. Vail himself:

"I was born in Dunham, Quebec, May 9, 1811. My parents had just moved to Canada from Vermont and had purchased 500 acres of land. Early in the year 1812 notice was sent out by the British authorities that every man over 21 must take the oath of allegiance or leave the country. This resulted in our moving back to Vermont. After the close of the war father returned to Canada to claim his property but found that it had all been confiscated by the British government. This experience was a bitter one for my parents, and they resolved henceforth to make the best of American opportunities, and here they lived, father reaching the age of 65 and mother 83.

### **Came West in 1836**

"In 1836 I came West with Mr. Hardin Beebe and his family. They settled on a claim later, known as Beebe's Grove, which was not far from what is now Crete, Ill. In October of that year I

made a trip to Chicago. It was then a crude looking place. It was not an unusual thing to see a team stuck in the mud on Lake Street. I could have purchased lots on this street for \$20 or \$25 each, while on State Street lots could have been had for a song. Had I acted upon my own judgment I should certainly have secured some of the ground in the business section of the city, instead of the claim of 160 acres which I purchased here for \$2,200.

“In 1837 I married Miss Anna Beebe, and when we settled on our claim there were just two shanties where Momence now stands. The next year (1838) I drew my wheat to Chicago with an ox team and sold it for 37 ½ cents per bushel. It took three days to make the trip. In those days neighbors were few, and in our little colony reciprocity was a prominent plank in our common platform. Each had a desire for the common good of all. When our little community consisted of six families, the need of school advantages was keenly felt, and I have always held in grateful remembrance my humble effort to provide for this necessity by erecting a little building which was the first frame schoolhouse in Kankakee County. This same building is now the kitchen part of our home, for, after being used five years for school purposes, it was outgrown and gave place to a larger building.”

### **Made an Off Fellow in 1847**

By questioning Mr. Vail, we learned that no charge was made by him for the erection or use of the little building he described. From local citizens we learned that generosity was truly an inborn trait of this remarkable man and the gift of the little schoolhouse was only one of many kindnesses he has been pleased to extend to his neighbors.

Mr. Vail was made an Odd Fellow in 1847. He was the first postmaster of Momence. He has served as supervisor, as grand juror, and is now a justice of the peace. He has served for many years in the last capacity, and while appeals have been made from his decisions it is especially gratifying to him to know that thus far there never has been a reversal of his judgment by a superior court. Although the ministers of the town are all duly authorized to perform the marriage ceremony, the people, young, middle aged and old for miles around all know Uncle Algernon and all think that the nuptial knot can be just a little more cleverly, permanently, and propitiously tied by him. Because of such belief and the general confidence of the public in his justice as an arbitrator, this popular patriarch is allotted as much work as could reasonably be expected of one so near the hundredth milestone.

Mr. Vail has been thrice pledged in marriage. His first wife was Anna Beebe: second, Nancy B. Ridlon; third, Mrs. Willard B. Smith (Lucia B. Munson). His only children were four by his first wife, of whom one, Hardin E., who is 64 years of age, is living. Grandchildren number three, a boy and two girls. The present Mrs. Vail, who is a strong, fine looking lady of 73 years, laughs heartily over her first introduction to Algernon S. She says he frankly told her he was looking for a wife and was so straightforward and businesslike about the proposition that she thought he

would make a pretty good partner, and so within a few days they were married-June 26, 1889. Both declare neither made a mistake that both did well, and the writer affirms this judgment. The old gentleman in his optimistic way of looking upon life declared that he loved each wife with all his might, and that, therefore, each shared alike in his esteem. Mrs. Vail speaks with enviable pride of her husband's ability as a sportsman, and as evidence of his marksmanship points to the horns of a deer shot by him in northern Minnesota when he was 82 years of age. Both enjoy telling of their camping experience at Long Lake last fall, the fishing, hunting, and brisk little walk of seven miles to Drummond Station, where they took the train for the return home. Both are looking forward with hope that they may fitly celebrate the 100th anniversary of Mr. Vail's birth by just such another enjoyable outing.

### **Trapped in the Kankakee Valley**

While speaking of the pleasures which hunting, and fishing afforded, Mr. Vail incidentally remarked that during the winters of 1851 and 1852 he collected in the valley of the Kankakee over \$13,000 worth of skins and furs.

In answer to our question, "Did you ever have a physical encounter with another man?" the reply came! "NO. The nearest I ever came to this was when in the fall of 1863, just as I was sitting down to dinner at the Eleven Mile house on State Street a secessionist said, "I hope every Northern man who goes to fight the South will be killed." I immediately arose from my chair and said: "I can whip any man who would make such a cowardly statement. Step right out here." The unexpected sudden appearance of so large a contingent of the North seemed to nonplus the gentleman, and a battle was averted by immediate apology. Mr. Vail knows no particular cause to which to ascribe his excellent health through so many years. He has never used tobacco, and as for liquor, he has always kept some in the house, which he takes in case of a cold, but never has he felt the influence of intoxication. A constantly active life, with plenty of work in the open air, has undoubtedly contributed in no slight degree to the rugged health of this aged man, who seems to have a lurking suspicion that Ponce de Leon searched much too far southeast for a fountain of perpetual youth. Happier than king of president, fully enjoying every hour as it passes, this grand old sage of the beautiful valley of the Kankakee is not gloomily sitting down waiting for Atropos to appear and clip the thread of life. Oh, no! He is cheerfully looking forward to many more years of comfort with his companionable wife, to other Elysian days when the deer roams at large and the fish bite, to further service in the quiet pursuits of life wherein he may continue to add his humble effort toward the betterment of humanity.

To all such hopes and aspirations of Algernon Sydney Vail, his hosts of admirers, one and all, say "Amen."

*Algernon Sydney Vail died on February 18, 1910 in Mobile, AL. at the age of 99.*

Credits: Inter Ocean, Chicago 1907 Newspaper